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Digitising Vernacular Recordings: Preservation Efforts at the Phonogram Archives of the University of Zurich

1. The Phonogram Archives of the University of Zurich (PAZ) and the Genesis of Its Collection

Albert Bachmann, professor of German philology at the University of Zurich and editor-in-chief of the *Schweizerisches Idiotikon*, developed an interest in the possibilities offered by the relatively recent technology of sound-recording after reading Joseph Seemüller's *Deutsche Mundarten* in 1908, whose dialectological work had been based on wax disc recordings made by the Phonogram Archives in Vienna (founded in 1899). He contacted the Phonogram Archives in Vienna, asking permission to borrow one of its phonographs. Fritz Hauser, assistant at the Phonogram Archives in Vienna, delivered such a device to Zurich in 1909 on behalf of the institute and instructed Bachmann and Jakob Vetsch, a former student of Bachmann's, on operating the phonograph. From July to December 1909, Bachmann produced 35 vernacular recordings of his students, who came from various parts of the German-speaking part of Switzerland, and of well-known Swiss authors. The wax disc originals were sent back to Vienna where a matrix was created; one copy remained in the Phonogram Archives in Vienna while another copy was sent back to the University of Zurich, where in the meantime an appropriate room had been allocated to house the henceforth ever growing collection of wax discs of the Zurich Archives. In the following years, Louis Gauchat, professor of Romance philology at the University of Zurich and founder and editor-in-chief of the *Glossaire des patois de la Suisse romande*, and Robert von Planta, founder and editor-in-chief of the *Dicziunari Rumantsch Grischun*, and Albert Bachmann held regular meetings to decide where to turn the focus of interest next. Until 1923, the technical officers of the Phonogram Archives of the University of Zürich – Jakob Vetsch (in 1909 and 1910), Wilhelm Wiget (in 1911 and 1912) and Otto Gröger (from 1913 until 1936) – managed to produce 337 phonograph wax disc recordings from all over Switzerland, laying the foundation for Switzerland's only dialectological sound archives.¹

After World War I the supplies of blank wax discs from Vienna became more and more intermittent and the PAZ decided to look for a new partner. Wilhelm Doegen, founder and director of the *Lautabteilung an der Preußischen Staatsbibliothek* in Berlin (now: *Lautarchiv der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin*) was invited to travel to Switzerland to make recordings with a gramophone disc recorder on five occasions. Thus, another 229 shellac recordings could be added to the PAZ's collection in the years 1924 to 1929.² After some disagreement how the costs should be split between Berlin and Zurich, the PAZ decided to purchase a recording device of its own. Leo Hajek, from the Vienna Phonogram Archives was invited to showcase his model. After recording campaigns in 1930 and 1932, the latter with some serious technical problems,³ the PAZ decided

¹ The Vienna wax disc recordings were published almost integrally in: Fleischer and Gadmer (2002a-c); 19 of the 337 known recordings were not extant in either of the archives; 8 recordings were not included for technical or linguistic reasons; however, another 12 wax disc recordings from the Vienna Phonogram Archives' collection were added, instead, in the edition, totalling 322 recordings.

² Only a small part of these recordings have been published so far.

³ The 1930 recordings are included in Fleischer and Gadmer (2002a-c). The 1932 recordings were considered to be a failure then. However, in August 2011, a first chunk of 33 recordings from the so-called *Archives des Patois I* with rare Franco-Provençal recordings from 1932 has been successfully digitised at

instead to buy a Swiss product, in order to become independent from foreign institutes. In 1933 a gelatine disc cutter 'System Domofon' was bought and, in the following years, approximately 220 recordings were made with this contraption until 1938, now under the direction of Eugen Dieth (1934 until 1956), professor of general phonetics, and the technical officer Robert Brunner (from 1936 until 1968). Only a small number of these recordings were later turned into durable shellac discs.⁴

Just before and during World War II, the PAZ relied on a professional recording studio and invited the speakers to come to Zurich for the recording sessions.⁵ In 1948, a Webster Wire Recorder was bought, but it was only used in a few recordings and was soon replaced by a tape recorder (borrowed from another institute after 1954, and bought in 1956). Three major recording campaigns (apart from several minor campaigns) with tape recorders were conducted: the so-called *Begleitaufnahmen zum Sprachatlas der deutschen Schweiz* (ZSDS) in the late 1950s, an extended campaign in the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland in the 1970s (ZLDI) and an extended campaign in the Romansh-speaking part of Switzerland on Swiss-German/Romansh language contact in the Hinterrhein region of Grisons in the 1980s (ZLGR).⁶ In the 1990s a project focussing on the urban socio-linguistic varieties of Switzerland's capital Bern was undertaken recorded on Digital Audio Tape (cf. Siebenhaar and Stäheli 2000). Since the turn of the millennium, there has been a shift of attention back to the early recordings of the PAZ.

In addition to the recordings made by the PAZ's staff over more than a century, a growing number of recordings of vernacular speakers made by private individuals have also been deposited in the PAZ over the years, including audio tapes, Compact Cassettes, MiniDiscs DATs and CD-ROMs. Unfortunately, no clear depositing routines have yet been developed and the amount of documentation stored alongside the actual sound media varies quite considerably.

2. The Present-Day State of the PAZ as an Organizational Unit within the University of Zurich

Due to their long-term goals, archives and libraries often follow a different organizational logic from research institutions. Therefore, since the early days of its existence, the PAZ had enjoyed a particular organisational structure within the University of Zurich. On the one hand, there was a Leading Committee (*Leitende Kommission*) consisting of dialectologists (ideally at least one from each of the four linguistic regions of the country) that decided on the strategic focus of the Archives' work and, on the other hand, there was a part-time Technical Officer who was responsible for most of the actual archival work involved. The President of the Leading Committee had some share in the routines of the Archives, but being a full professor of another institute within the University of Zurich, a detailed knowledge of the holdings of the PAZ was usually reserved to the Technical Officer.

the Swiss National Sound Archives. A small number of cracked discs from that same collection will soon be digitised by means of *VisualAudio*.

⁴ An even smaller number of them has been published so far. Many of these discs are now in the Swiss National Sound Archives awaiting digitisation.

⁵ A major series of recordings that took place in 1938/39 will soon be re-published on audio CD with an augmented second edition of the accompanying text book *Stimmen der Heimat* (1939).

⁶ The three campaigns proved to be highly productive. ZSDS resulted in 16 LP records and 4 text books; ZLDI in 6 (7) LP records and 5 text books and ZLGR in 1 LP record, 7 (8) Compact Cassettes and 11 text books.

Some of the part-time Technical Officers stayed on for an extended period of time (Gröger for 23 years and Brunner for 32 years). Three years after Brunner's retirement, however, the post of the part-time Technical Officer was changed into a full-time assistantship in 1971 and this post was split into two half-time assistantships two years later. Since then, no assistant has stayed on longer than 6 years at the PAZ, due to university-wide regulations. Moreover, the assistants tended to focus on their individual projects, which could not last longer than 6 years. Long-term in-depth knowledge of the PAZ's holdings started to wane and former oddities in the Archive's collections eventually turned into mysteries, as existing discrepancies between the written records and the extant objects in the Archives became impossible to explain. This systemic change was certainly a positive development from the point of view of research interests, as more resources were available for the individual projects, resulting in an impressive output of book and sound publications. From the point of view of archival continuity, however, the change was – in a way – less fortunate.

While both Gröger and Brunner maintained a high degree of archival orderliness in their documentation (shelfmarks of the individual sound media, incoming and outgoing letters, protocols of recordings, social data of speakers, etc.), the differing aims of the individual projects after 1968 resulted in a high degree of individuality in their respective documentation: These projects aimed at the publication of books on one (usually rather specific) topic, while the long-term archiving of the sound material took a back seat. After all, the recordings were a means to an end, and documentation beyond the publications remained rather sketchy. After having to move the PAZ's holding twice in relatively short succession in 2004 and in 2006 (and after uniting the holdings in one location in 2010), it has become rather difficult to make sense of these idiosyncratically documented projects and their media, because the former assistants' memory would often rely on the location of the objects in the offices and storage rooms of the PAZ's former localities. A lot of documentation is in existence, but its contents have to be worked through individually in highly labour-intensive work.

Currently, several projects are being pursued by and for the PAZ:

- A re-edition of the 1939 *Stimmen der Heimat* planned to be published by Elvira Glaser and Michele Loporcaro – Co-Presidents of the Leading Committee – in late 2011. It contains 34 texts from all over Switzerland that were published on shellac discs on the occasion of the Swiss National Exhibition in 1939, and will now be re-issued on two audio CDs. The accompanying text book will contain an orthographic transcript of the texts, a phonetic transcription in IPA and a translation into one of the four Swiss national languages, each. The texts from the various linguistics regions of Switzerland are edited by Dieter Studer-Joho, Michael Schwarzenbach (both assistant at the PAZ), Matthias Grünert (University of Zurich), Raphaël Maître (Glossaire des patois de la Suisse romande) and Federica Diémoz (University of Neuchâtel).
- A major exhibition on Swiss dialects, taking place in the Swiss National Library in Bern in 2012, is being co-curated by Michael Schwarzenbach. One of the exhibition's highlights will include a sound shower installation with a number of PAZ recordings.
- A comprehensive web-based catalogue of the PAZ's holdings is compiled by Dieter Studer-Joho with the support of Camilla Bernardasci (University of Zurich), whose engagement in this matter has been made possible by a grant from the Stiftung für wissenschaftliche Forschung an der Universität Zürich (cf. Section 4).
- Rico Valär (University of Zurich) is re-editing Romansh shellac recordings made in Chur in 1926 by Wilhelm Doegen. The re-edition is based on a text edition of the recordings published by Andrea Schorta in 1946 and will be augmented by a dialect-orthographic tran-

scription, a phonetic transcription according to IPA and a translation in Standard German. The recordings have already been digitised and mastered by the Swiss National Sound Archives on the basis of pristine shellac disc specimens.

- Camilla Bernardasci and Michael Schwarzenbach have just started to focus on Lombard dialect recordings made by Doegen in 1929 in Bellinzona with speakers from the canton Ticino and they plan to edit these texts in a similar fashion.

Since the Phonetics Laboratory of the University of Zurich (Pholab) was endowed with an Assistant Professorship in 2010, there have been plans to unite the two institutions under a common superstructure, but no definite schedule for such a fusion has yet been determined. Ever since the Pholab was founded by Eugen Dieth in 1936, the two institutions have had strong connections. Such a change would probably disrupt the organisational structure of the Archives to quite some extent and good care will have to be taken that the archival aspects of the institution will be observed duly in the process.

3. The Present-Day Physical State of the Collection

From the very beginning of its activities, the PAZ has never enjoyed the availability of an appropriate storage room for its sensitive audio media. Currently, the Archives' storage room is situated in an air raid shelter on the premises of the University. Until 2010, when other archival goods stored in even less favourable conditions in another location were united with the material in the air raid shelter, the room was still equipped with emergency beds (now stored in a room next door) and, at least theoretically, the room would have to be evacuated within 24 hours in case of a major emergency. It is more than doubtful if all the physical carriers could be evacuated safely and in an orderly fashion on such short notice. While the humidity is held in check by a dehumidifier, temperature fluctuations are a big problem. A small heater keeps temperatures above 14 °C in winter, but in summertime temperatures often rise above 22 °C. Apparently, the audio media have not yet developed serious visible damage, but it is obvious that the current storage room cannot be considered to be a long-term option. In recent years it has become evident that it is not likely that a more suitable long-term storage solution within the premises of the University can be found in the near future. Since the Swiss National Sound Archives has a very well-equipped storage room at its disposal, a permanent deposit of the most vulnerable recording media there, such as wax and gelatine discs, will be taken into serious consideration. Informal preliminary negotiations have already taken place.

4. Current Attempts at Compiling a Comprehensive Catalogue

During the preparations for the anniversary exhibition in 2009, on the occasion of the centennial of the PAZ's first sound recording, it became apparent that the lack of a comprehensive catalogue of the PAZ's holdings seriously impaired the long-term integrity and usability of the Archives' collection. While attempts at cataloguing had been made just before World War II – a slip box compiled by Rudolf Brunner and, during the 1990s, a 60-page word processor document compiled by Fredy Stäheli und Beat Siebenhaar – the results were both not equally detailed across the whole collection and by no means complete. Furthermore, both of their catalogues had not been continued by their respective successors and remained as monolithic treasure troves for information about the collection.

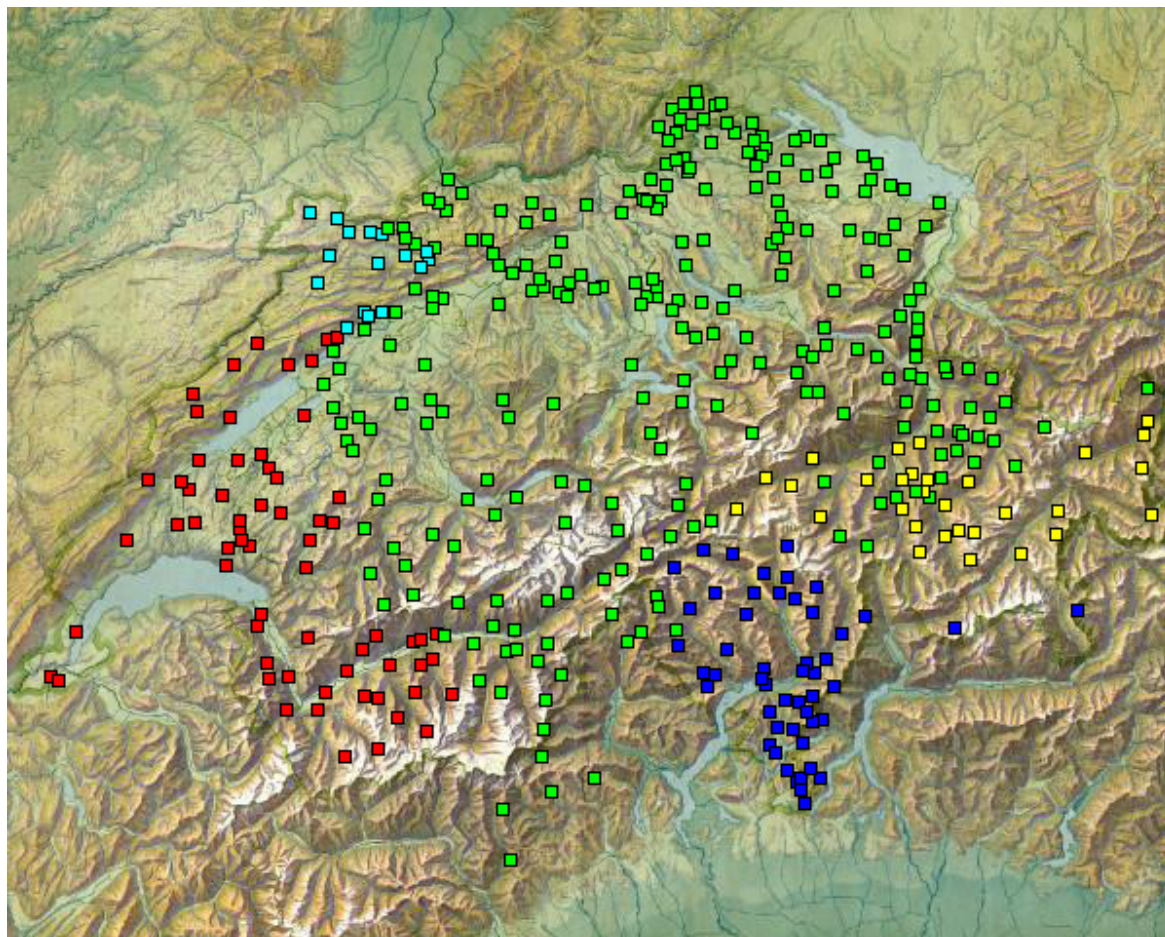
Luckily, a successful grant application in 2010 opened up the possibility of combining the contents of the existing catalogues in a MySQL database, which has been steadily growing since. As it was already foreseeable that huge differences in the quantity and quality of information available with respect to individual recording campaigns would have to be expected, the database started out with an open design and was adapted to changing needs as time passed by. It was foreseeable from the start, too, that the same recording would be found as copies on several carriers, including different media types; e.g. a shellac recording (made in the 1920s), re-issued on vinyl record (in the 1960s) and audio CD (in the 1990s) with accompanying mastering tapes (from the 1960s). As a consequence, it became soon obvious that an inventory of all the carriers alone would not be sufficient to reflect the complexity of the historically grown collection and that it was necessary to distinguish between the physical carriers and the actual recordings on them. As a further complication there were recordings of which no physical carriers were extant, yet there was documentation on these recordings, sometimes even highly accurate transcriptions.

Therefore, a detailed list of the individual recordings (independent of the physical or digital incarnations of the recording) was drawn up as the core of the database. Recordings that were known to have been made, but were not extant on any physical carrier in the Archives' holdings were included in that list, as a consequence. All available information was added to that list, such as: names of speakers, recording date, location of recording, the linguistic variety that was represented by the recording, the recording campaign, sound publications that contain the specific recording, text publications that document the specific recording, the original medium used in the recording, the name of the phonographist, the unique identifier of its matrix (if applicable), the unique identifier of its original physical carrier (if applicable), etc. Additional database tables were then created to add information on entities related to a recording, such as social data of the speaker, or bibliographical information on text publications, etc. Care was taken to connect each individual fact through a unique identifier (or a chain of unique identifiers) to the core list of recordings.

A second detailed list was drawn up to take account of all the carriers in the Archives' storage. Their material, dimensions, labels, status (original, copy, master tape etc.), shelfmarks and recording campaign were recorded accordingly. During that process, every physical carrier was marked with a unique identification number and its storage place was noted down. At the same time, packaging for the more vulnerable media was renewed and improved and detached slips of paper that were recovered in the process were numbered to ensure their traceability. The list of the carriers and their tagging is now basically finished. As a next step some of the carriers' current storage places will be rearranged in order to re-unite collections that had been torn apart during the moves in 2004, 2006 and 2010.

Theoretically, the cataloguing process will be completed when the two lists will perfectly match each other. Each carrier has a definite number of recordings on it and each recording is represented on a definite number of carriers (including zero, unfortunately). However, it was soon clear that this perfect state of affairs would hardly ever be attained. There are insufficiently labelled carriers that contain recordings that we cannot identify with any certainty, and there are recordings that we know must have existed, but we have not yet been able to identify the accompanying physical carriers. Hence, the catalogue will probably always remain work in progress. However, even so, the catalogue has already proven to be an enormous help in everyday use. Enquiries by external dialect enthusiasts can be dealt with more accurately and more efficiently and in-house questions arising in everyday archival work can often be resolved in connection with the database. Acting like a sponge, the database hopefully ensures that the amassed knowledge about the Archives' holding will become more durable in the long run.

A simple web interface was programmed in PHP to allow users to query the database freely from the PAZ's website,⁷ and audio clip previews of 30 seconds length have been added for those recordings that are digitally available to us (and whose copyright is with the PAZ). Moreover, a graphical interface offers a simple geo-referenced search procedure that allows users to find all the catalogued recordings from a specific area within Switzerland (cf. Picture 1).



Picture 1. A clickable Swiss map on the PAZ's web page (<http://www.phonogrammarchiv.uzh.ch/>) allows users to find recordings from a specific region quickly. (Copyright: PAZ)

Luckily, the funds will be sufficient to cover the first 60 years of the PAZ's recording activity (1909–1969) comprehensively. It will also be possible to lay the groundwork for the cataloguing of the subsequent recording campaigns that will have to be individually dealt with (cf. Section 2), probably only at a later stage.

5. A Look Ahead

With regards to the historical holdings of the Archives, several desiderata are yet left untackled. While the earliest wax disc recordings (1909–1923) have been edited and published in an ex-

⁷ <http://www.phonogrammarchiv.uzh.ch/>

emplary manner (cf. Section 1.), Wilhelm Doegen's shellac recordings (1924–1929) have only been edited partially. The recording campaigns of 1926 in Chur are edited in Schorta (1942) and in Rico Valär's forthcoming re-edition (cf. Section 2.) and in Gadmer (2003). The 1929 recordings from Domodossola (I) are edited in Gysling and Hotzenköcherle (1952) and the 1929 recordings from Bellinzona are about to be edited by Camilla Bernardasci and Michael Schwarzenbach (cf. Section 2.). The other campaigns undertaken by Doegen – in Zurich (1924), Bern (1925) and Brig/Sion (1927) – served as a basis for a number of text editions published from 1930 until 1934 by the *Institut für Lautforschung an der Universität Berlin*, but no attempts at a comprehensive edition of these recordings have yet been made.

The Franco-Provençal recordings of 1932 (*Archives des Patois vaudois I*) and of 1933–1937 (*Archives des Patois vaudois II*) have not yet seen the attention they deserve, either. Almost all of the discs have already been digitised successfully by the Swiss National Audio Archives while a few will be in need of more detailed conservation work. The PAZ hopes to find a suitable expert in the field of Franco-Provençal dialectology in the near future who would be willing to prepare an edition of these historically unique recordings of now extinct varieties.

Finally, a treasure which has to date been neglected is the PAZ's collection of gelatine discs recorded from 1933 until 1938. It contains approximately 220 recordings from the cantons of Aargau, Ticino, Uri, Nidwalden, Obwalden, Bern, Schaffhausen, Zurich, Solothurn and Grisons, and contains a number of linguistic varieties that are not present in the remaining collection of the PAZ. Especially the recordings from the Jura region of the canton of Bern are of interest as they contain specimens of now extinct Franco-Provençal varieties. The carriers in question have been deposited temporarily at the Swiss National Sound Archives in Bellinzona, but they have not yet been digitised. It will be exciting to see if and how much sound can still be extracted out of these transparent discs after more than 75 years.

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